Factors Militating Against Usage of Research and Scholarship Works among Faculty and Students

By

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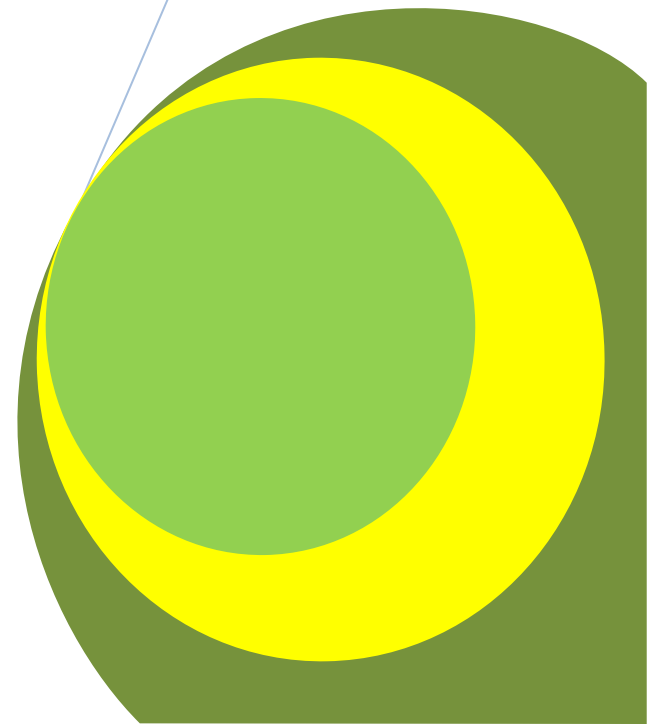
Research Article

Factors Militating Against Usage of Research and Scholarship Works among Faculty and Students

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ABSTRACT

This study sought to explore the factors militating against the usage of research and scholarship works among university faculty and students at the Zimbabwe Open University. The study adopted a multi site case study approach in which two regions of ZOU (Mashonaland East and West) were explored over time through the use of structured interviews, which solicited for information about faculty and students` usage of research and scholarship works. However, data were reported both qualitatively and quantitatively. A total of 26 lecturers and 912 students made the total population. All the 26 lecturers were interviewed. A purposive sample of 100 students was drawn from the four faculties of the university and these were also interviewed through the use of assistant interviewers. Despite the availability of research and scholarship works, there seems to be under-utilisation of these because of a number of challenges which include the nature and form of the research and scholarship work, inability to manipulate ICT gadgets by potential users, financial constraints, inadequate internet connectivity and social networking on the internet. In light of these findings, it was recommended that research and scholarship works be available in a more accessible and appropriate nature and form. There should be training in ICT usage to enable access and use of research and scholarship works. Funds should be made available for the acquisition of essential gadgets and social networking on the internet could drastically be reduced so that potential users focus more on research and scholarship work.

Keywords: Research, Scholarship, Faculty, Students.

INTRODUCTION

The academic fraternity thrives on the use of research and scholarship works. The usage of research and scholarship works is dependent upon a number of factors. Such usage at most, depends on the extent to which consumers are aware of the existence of such research and scholarship works. Also important is the fact that even if the consumers are aware, do they readily access the research and scholarship works? In Zimbabwe, the Education for All (EFA) policy enunciated in 1980 and promulgated in the 1987 Education Act and has had a tremendous effect on the literacy levels. The Zimbabwe literacy rate currently stands at 92% and it has frog jumped Tunisia to become the nation with the highest literacy rate in Africa. This therefore, is firm basis for readership and use of research and scholarship works. However, impediments to the use of these academic works have surfaced thus impeding both access and use. It is behind this background that this study sought to explore the factors militating against usage of research and scholarship works among university faculty and students at the Zimbabwe Open University.

Background to the study

The Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) is a state only open and distance learning (ODL) institution in Zimbabwe. It was created to cater for people who could not be accommodated in conventional universities. The institution offers students the opportunity to study in their homes and at their workplaces through distance education. ZOU was established in 1999 through an Act of Parliament (Chapter 25:20). It had an initial enrolment of 624 students registered for the Bachelor of Education degree programme. Until 2010, ZOU was rated the second largest in the SADC region but thereafter the student population dropped to below 10, 000 due to the socioeconomic hardships experienced in the country by then. During the time of this study, in 2013, ZOU had four faculties; the Faculty of Arts and Education, the Faculty of Science and Technology, the faculty of Commerce and Law and the faculty of Applied Social Sciences, offering diploma courses, undergraduate degree programmes, masters` programmes and doctoral degrees. Like in any university and institution of higher learning, ZOU is mandated to create knowledge meant to solve societal problems. However, in the quest for the fulfillment of this mandate there are challenges facing the

students and lecturers in both accessing and usage of research and scholarship works. On one hand, research output in the regions of ZOU by lecturers has been minimal while student citations of e-books in their assignments and research projects have not been encouraging. Despite attempts by the institution to avail resources and a conducive environment in terms of technology, staff and students in the four faculties have been confronted with hindrances which have limited both production and creation of knowledge on one hand and the use of this knowledge on the other. Hence, this study was aimed at exploring the factors militating against usage of research and scholarship works among university faculty and students at the Zimbabwe Open University.

Statement of the problem

The use of research and scholarship works among faculty and students remains a cause for concern. Despite being inadequate, the research and scholarship works, much as they are important, are not being fully utilised. It is therefore, of interest to establish factors militating against usage of such works among university faculty and students at the Zimbabwe Open University.

Research questions

In an attempt to answer the research problem, the current study undertook to answer the following sub-questions:

1. How available are the research and scholarship works to the potential users?
2. What skills do the potential users have to enable them access the research and scholarship works?
3. Which resources are available to enable the potential users' access the research and scholarship works?
4. What distractors tend to interfere with the potential users` attempts at using and accessing research and scholarship works?
5. How can the use of research and scholarship works be improved?

Significance of the study

The current study is significant in as far as it attempts to unearth the impediments to the use of research and scholarship works at the Zimbabwe Open University. The study becomes handy in that it highlights the strategies to increase the effectiveness in the use of research and scholarship works. In a way management will be prompted to make provisions for appropriate resources meant to address the challenges in use of research and scholarship works among faculty and students. In addition, the study assists the university authorities to establish the level of acceptance of usage of research and scholarship works. The dissemination of this information to potential users and university management will be done through the publication of the paper and through seminars as well as discussions with colleagues and students at ZOU.

Review of related literature

A number of studies have been carried out on the use of research and scholarship works. Results from some of the studies go to show that availability of research and scholarship works is limited (Kariuki, 2000; Zeleza & Olukoshi, 2004; Oyowe, 2009). Research and scholarship use and output may be hampered or facilitated by economic factors (Kariuki, 2000; Zeleza & Olukoshi, 2004; Oyowe, 2009). Kariuki (2000) established that African universities are financed from the government budget. As such one of the problems of funding is that the university competes with other demanding needs in the economy. The governments are concentrating their spending in the development of other areas of the society.

Some studies elsewhere have also outlined what are believed to be three main challenges affecting the research process, namely research capacity, research productivity and research utility (Zakri, 2006). Research capacity refers to the availability of research facilities and the availability of trained human personnel. While research productivity refers to the output of research work; and research utility focuses on the relevance of research outcomes as they relate to the national development agenda or priorities.

Oyewole (2009) and Manyika & Szanton (2001) remark that carrying out research studies and using them is curtailed in African universities because of inadequate resources. The challenges currently experienced in the research process are also coupled with poor teaching conditions making most of the scholars operate businesses or part-time jobs to make ends meet. Lack of sufficient research undermines the very core business of the African universities and undermines sustainable development because there is no adequate research material for use in solving practical societal problems (Kariuki, 2000; Oyewole, 2009; Zeleza & Olukoshi 2004).

Other studies have established that there is lack of ICT skills among potential users as well as limited availability of technological gadgets (Isah, 2010; Kangai and Bukaliya, 2011; Bukaliya and Mubika, 2012 & Bukaliya and Dzimano, 2011). With the advent of technology, most producers of research and scholarship works have resorted to the publication of these works on-line. This has deprived the traditional library of the works that used to be available in the shelves. That being the case, it would appear accessing the e-books have been a challenge due to the lack of ICT competence. Studies have shown that internet knowledge among potential research and scholarship works users is scanty. Adika (2003) analysed Internet use among faculty members of universities in Ghana and found that in spite of the benefits of the Internet in research, its use among faculty is still very low. This low uptake has been attributed to lack of access to the Internet and the need for training. In South African universities, researchers at graduate level experienced lack of information retrieval skills when it came to accessing and subsequently using the web based scholarship works (Biermann & Jordaan, 2007). They also found that the state of research at the universities of technology was poor because of the scarcity of research expertise, resulting in low research use and output. Gakio (2006) has described the state of Internet connectivity in tertiary institutions in Africa as 'too little, too expensive and poorly managed hence usage among students and academics is low. Oyewole (2009) established that lack of skilled human capacity in many countries is a limitation to the production and use of research works.

Kariuki (2000) and Oyewole (2009) posit that lack of usage of research and scholarship works is due to lack of cooperation among faculty. Oyewole (2009) remarks that inadequate cooperation and collaborations among academics and researchers in Africa limits experience sharing, hence use.

It was also observed that social network platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp, Gtalk and Twitter have tended to distract the attention of users to make use of research and scholarship works as most academics and students lost valuable time on social media posting news and pictures at the expense of academic work (Kim and Sin, 2013, Bukaliya and Muyengwa, 2012).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study is rooted in the qualitative research paradigm. The qualitative paradigm was deemed essential for the conduct of this study as it analyses information conveyed through language and behaviour in natural settings (Kumar, 2008; Gray, 2009). This entailed that the researchers studied the behaviour of the participants in their natural setting attempting to make sense of the phenomenon of challenges research and scholarship works usage among academics and students at ZOU. Thus data were collected in the regional centres where the participants experienced the challenges in the use of research and scholarship works. The study adopted a multi site case study approach in which two regions of ZOU (Mashonaland East and West) were explored over time through the use of structured interviews, which solicited for information about faculty and students` usage of research and scholarship works. However, data were reported both qualitatively and quantitatively.

The respondents responded to structured interview schedules in order to gather thick descriptions of data (Silverman, 2006; Seale and Charteris-Black, 2006). The structured interviews have the ability to gather dense data from respondents. From the structured interviews, the respondents had the latitude to describe in their own words the issues being investigated in this study. Use of tables enabled quantification of the participants` responses.

Population and sample

The study population consisted of faculty and students in two of the eleven regions of the Zimbabwe Open University. A total of 26 lecturers and 912 students made the total population. All the 26 lecturers were interviewed. A purposive sample of 100 students drawn from the four faculties of the university was also interviewed through the use of assistant interviews. A purposive sample was used because it is a qualitative non-probability sample which is usually consistent with the needs of research studies on beliefs, values, feelings and motivations that underlie behaviours.

Presentation and Discussion of results

In order to answer the research problem, five research questions were asked.
Research question 1 was stated as: **How available are the research and scholarship works to the potential users?**

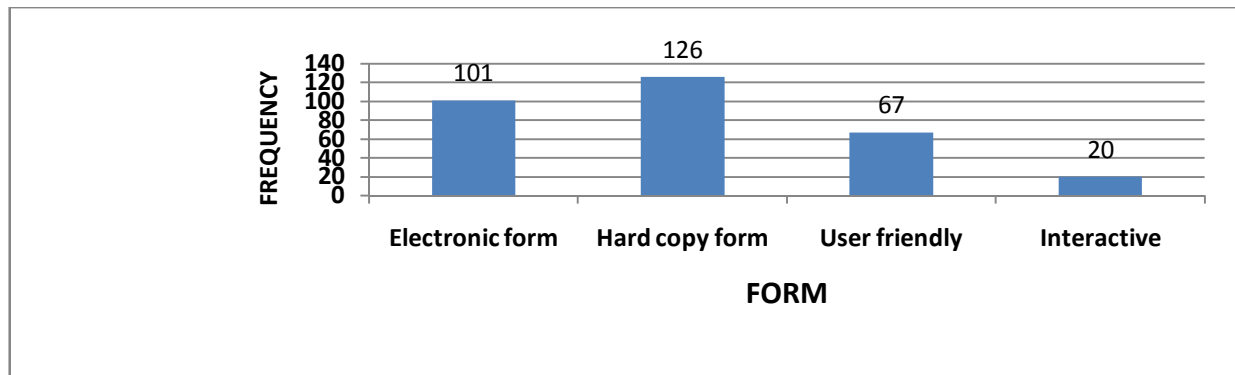Figure 1 below, shows the respondents` views.

Figure 1: Forms in which research and scholarship works exist to the potential user

Figure 1 shows that 100 (79%) revealed that research and scholarship work was available in electronic form, 126 (100%) in hardcopy form, 67 (53%) indicated the works were user friendly whereas 20 (16%) stated that the works were in interactive form. In their own words, most of the participants stated that these days they often had soft copies of research and scholarship works on the net. This in line with what Oyewole (2009) states that today, there are many research related electronic educational and scientific contents, such as African Digital library, HINARI, AGORA, PERI and JSTOR, however, which can only be accessed when the institutions have adequate and good internet connectivity. Other electronic facilities include EBSCO. Of late also, institutions have repositories for research articles and other scholarship works.

Research question 2 was stated as: **What skills do the potential users have to enable them access the research and scholarship works?**

Responses were sought from participants and the following figure shows these responses.
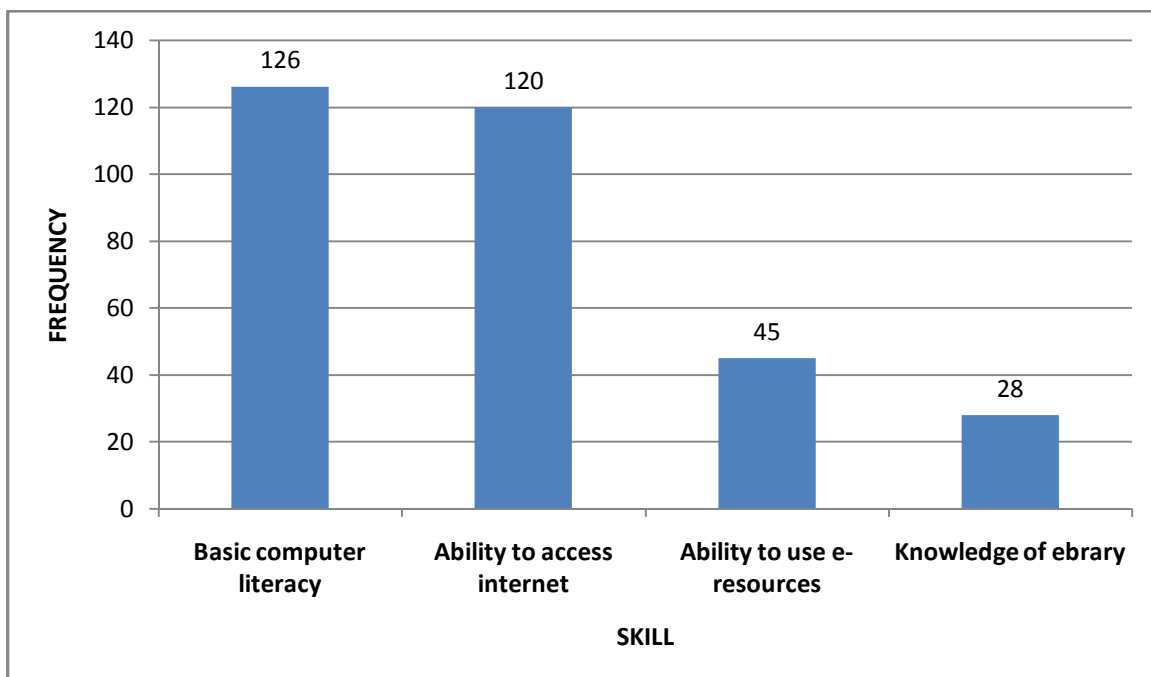

Figure 2: Responses on what skills faculty and students possessed

The 126 (100%) participants interviewed stated that they had the basic computer literacy to enable them access and use ICTs. Out of these, the majority indicated that there were efforts by the university to make them computer literate through the in-house training programme and the availing of the ICT technician in each of the regional centres. One hundred and twenty (95%) had the ability to access the internet. This was also through the institutional efforts. Forty-five (36%) had the ability to use e-resources whereas only 28 (22%) had the knowledge of ebrary. Those who had no knowledge of accessing the internet blamed it on their lack of concentration while being taught how to access the internet by the ICT technician. One participant responded that she did not have the knowledge to access the ebrary because the process was complicated and needed a lot of time which was not always available moreso as an academic member of staff who had a lot of other responsibilities to look at. The findings seem to agree with those by Biermann & Jordaan (2007) who established that users experienced lack of information retrieval skills when it came to accessing and subsequently using the web based scholarship works. The findings disagree with those by Gakio (2006) in that he described the state of Internet connectivity in tertiary institutions in Africa as 'too little, too expensive and poorly managed hence usage among students and academics are low. This is in contrast with what is prevailing since the majority of the respondents indicated that their institution had made in-roads into the provision of internet connectivity and also that they were computer literate. Also in contradiction, Oyewole (2009) established that lack of skilled human capacity in many countries is a limitation to the production and use of research works. There appears to be no challenges in manpower for the provision of ICT services at ZOU. All regional centres now have qualified ICT technicians.

Research question 3 was stated as: **Which resources are available to enable the potential users access the research and scholarship works?**
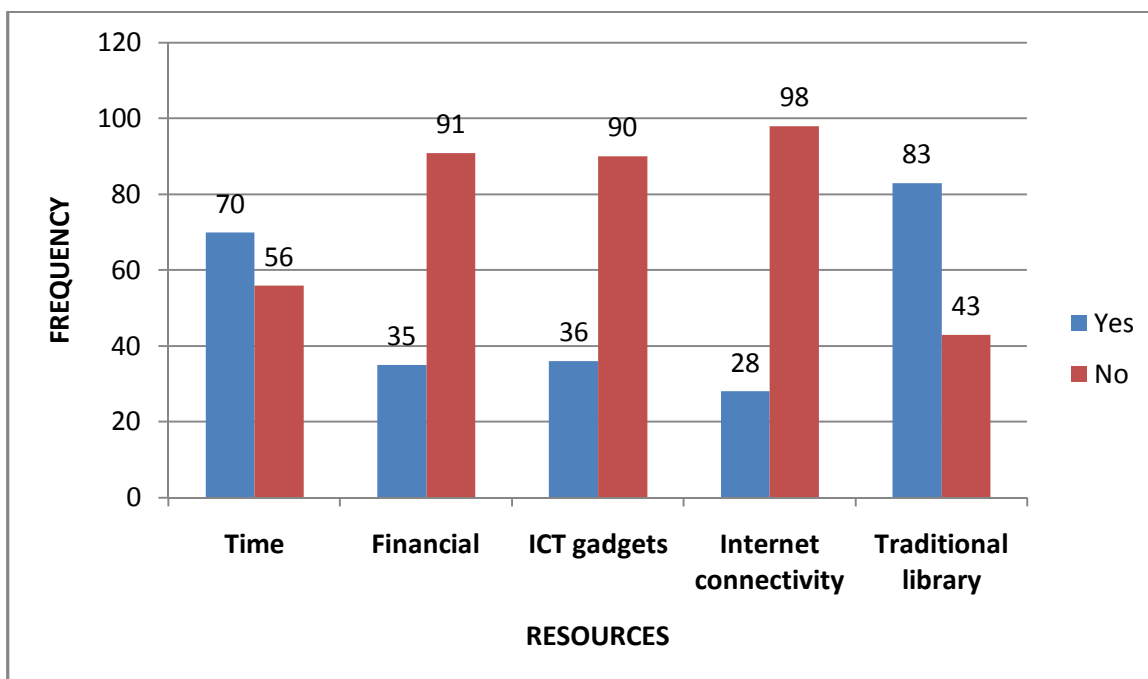
Figure 3, below shows the responses.

Figure 3: Resources are available to enable the potential users' access the research and scholarship works

Results from figure 3 show that 70 (56%) indicated that they had time to access the resources. Most of these respondents were students and one lecturer actually retorted that she had little time to access the internet. In her own words, she said, "Being a Programme Coordinator in ODL entails a number of responsibilities. You have to recruit, allocate courses and supervise part time staff, market your programmes, attend to student queries and above all you are required to research and all this is to be done by one person". The majority, 91 (72%) indicated financial constraints. Only 36 (29%) possessed ICT gadgets, most of whom were lecturers. This finding is in line with previous studies by Isah, (2010), Kangai and Bukaliya (2011), Bukaliya and Mubika, (2012) and Bukaliya and Dzimano (2011).

All these studies point to lack of gadgets among potential users. Internet connectivity was a problem to the majority as indicated by 98 (78%) of the participants. This response was mostly from the students. These were situated in remote areas where connectivity was not available. One student stated that he could not find the appropriate gadgets for example, cellular phones which could connect to the internet. Traditional libraries were available to the majority of 83 (66%). The findings are in agreement with those by Oyewole (2009) and Manyika & Szanton (2001). These found out that inadequate resources curtailed the use of scholarship and research works in Africa. However, the issue of time as a resource seems to have generated a contradiction as most of the scholars operate businesses or part-time jobs to make ends meet (Oyewole, 2009; Manyika & Szanton, 2001). The idea that time is inadequate therefore is an issue for further debate now that the majority of the academics find time for part time jobs but the results of the current study show that time is inadequate for the ODL lecturer.

Research question 4 was stated as: **What distractors tend to interfere with the potential users` attempts at using and accessing research and scholarship works?**

Results from participants presented in the following figure help in answering the research question.
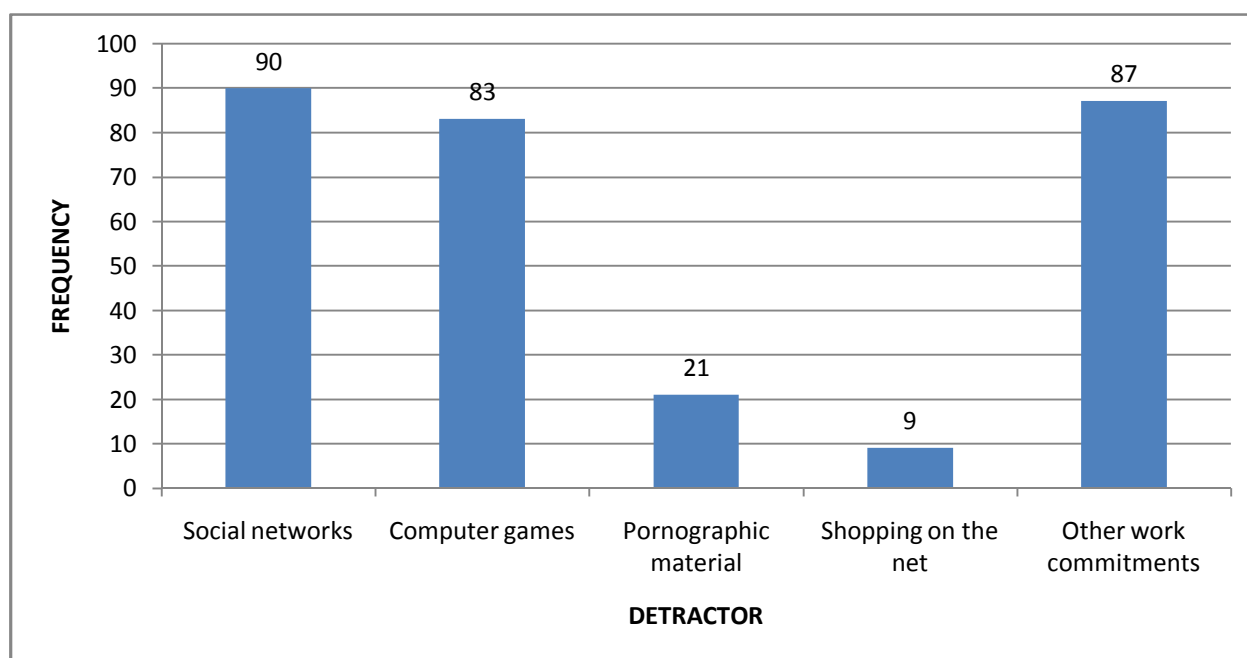

Figure 4: Distractors that tend to interfere with the potential users` attempts at using and accessing research and scholarship works

Figure 4 shows that social networks accounted for a majority of 90 (71%). Instead of logging onto the net for purposes of research and scholarship, most lecturers and students went into social networking exchanging the latest news in the community. One lecturer had this to say about the use of WhatsApp:

> Each time I get onto the net, I log into WhatsApp because I need to find out what will be happening in the country and the world at large. I get carried off such that I am unable to do my work. Besides if my friends see me on Gtalk, we discuss time on end and this eats up most of my working day.

Computer games were distractors to 83 (66%) of the respondents. Twenty-one (17%) respondents indicated that pornographic material interfered with their intentions to use research and scholarship works while shopping on the internet accounted for only 9 (7%). Other work commitments distracted 87 (69%) of the respondents. The same was also observed by Kim and Sin (2013) and Bukaliya and Muyengwa (2012) that social network platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp, Gtalk and Twitter have tended to distract the attention of users to make use of research and scholarship works.

Research question 5 was stated as: **How can the use of research and scholarship works be improved?**

A number of strategies were suggested by the respondents. These are as follows: induction of potential writers and users of ICTs (89%), use of appropriate ICT gadgets (96%) and availing appropriate websites to users (89%). All these point to the need for funding in universities. In line with this thinking, the universities should look for extra sources of financing including establishing income-generating activities as propounded by Zeleza et al, (2009) and Kariuki (2000).

Major findings of the study

The present study was meant to establish the major factors militating against the usage of research and scholarship works at ZOU among lecturers and students. Despite the availability of research and scholarship works, there seems to be underutilisation of these because of:

- the nature and form of the research and scholarship work;
- inability to manipulate ICT gadgets;
- financial constraints;
- inadequate internet connectivity;
- inadequate time;
- other work commitments; and
- Social networking on the internet.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In light of the above findings, it is recommended that:

- research and scholarship works be available in a more accessible and appropriate nature and form;
- there be training in ICT usage to enable access and use of research and scholarship works;
- funds be made available for the acquisition of essential gadgets;
- management provides facilities for greater internet connectivity;
- student and staff be trained in appropriate time management; and
- Social networking on the internet could be drastically reduced so that potential users focus more on academic work.

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